

Iconic Tom Raper RV dealership sold

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(Photo: Palladium-Item file)

Tom Raper RVs, an iconic dealership known throughout the Midwest, has been sold and its stores – including one in Fairfield – have been renamed.

David Bane, who has owned Richmond, Indiana-based Tom Raper RVs for almost 13 years, sold the dealership to Camping World, a national recreational vehicle sales and service company.

Camping World was founded in 1966 in Bowling Green, Ky., and the business has grown to include more than 100 "SuperCenters" nationwide, according to the company's website, www.campingworld.com (<http://www.campingworld.com/>).

The sale included the original Tom Raper RVs location in Richmond, along with the Fairfield location on Ohio 4 near Jungle Jims and another store in Columbus, Ohio. A banner on the Fairfield store carries the dealership's new name.

The three Tom Raper RVs locations employ about 185 people, many of whom have worked there more than 10 years.

"It's a big family," said Dave Bane, who sold the stores to Camping World.

When the RV industry – both manufacturing and sales – went through a historic slump in the Great Recession, more than 25 percent of RV dealerships were forced to close. Tom Raper RVs struggled as well, Bane said; however, the company has been on the rebound, reporting 2013 was the dealership's best year ever.

Founder Tom Raper had \$2,000 in capital in April 1964 when he opened a used car dealership in Richmond.

Over the years, Raper dropped the cars and added tent campers, travel trailers, motor homes and manufactured homes to his inventory, eventually creating what he called the largest RV dealership in America.

Raper said it took him three months to persuade Bane, a Richmond native, to leave a banking job in Cincinnati to join the RV dealership as general manager. Bane then bought the dealership from Raper in 2002.

"I really feel that David Bane was who I was meant to sell the dealership to," Raper said.

The business became a Midwestern landmark because of the huge 60-acre Richmond store and also for the jingle in commercials that urged customers to "save today the Tom Raper way."

In February 2014, Richmond officials renamed the street in front of the original store as Williamsburg Pike/Tom Raper Way – a tribute to Raper and his business savvy, as well as the dealership that had become synonymous with the city.

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